

Bill includes Rodriguez amendment to streamline soldiers' healthcare transition to VA (Washington, D.C.) - Congressman Ciro D. Rodriguez (TX-23) applauded passage of the Defense Authorization Bill, H.R. 1585, including the Mitchell, Space, Walz, Rodriguez amendment to streamline veterans' transition to VA. The bill passed with overwhelming support today with a 397 to 27 vote.

"I applaud the passage of the Defense Authorization bill, which will fund better health care for our troops, better pay, and the benefits they have earned," said Congressman Rodriguez. "Our amendment to the DOD bill will go a long way to helping our returning soldiers during a crucial period of transition as they transfer from DOD to VA medical services. In some cases doctors at the VA are literally assessing patients without access to their medical history from the DOD - they need help today so they can fix the significant impact to their health care services."

The DOD Authorization bill authorizes \$503.8 billion in budget authority for the Department of Defense (DoD) and the national security programs of the Department of Energy (DoE), and \$141.8 billion to support ongoing military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan during fiscal year 2008. This measure will provide the necessary resources and authorities to quickly and efficiently reverse declining trends in training and equipment readiness, and will also provide our service members doing their duty overseas in multiple wars with the best gear and force protection possible.

The Mitchell, Space, Walz, Rodriguez amendment clarifies legal provisions that currently slow down and complicate the transition for veterans between the Department of Defense (DOD) and Veterans Administration (VA) health care systems. According to the GAO, one reason the DOD and VA aren't sharing medical information is their differing interpretations of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act ("HIPAA"). The Mitchell, Space, Walz, Rodriguez Amendment would not alter HIPAA in any way but would make clear that returning service members must be offered an opportunity to sign a voluntary form allowing his or her complete medical and health information be made available to the VA. It would require that this will happen no later than 30 days after discharge.

Congressman Rodriguez serves on the House Committee on Appropriations and the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs.